



# STAR Center

Support, Technical Assistance and Resources Center



## **Multicultural Competence, Intense Spiritual Experiences, and Mental Health:**

### **A Self-help, Peer Support and Service Provider Technical Assistance Tool**

*Written by:*

Rev. Laura L. Mancuso, M.S., C.R.C.



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3803 N. Fairfax Dr., Suite 100, Arlington VA 22203  
[www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org)  
HelpLine: (800) 950-NAMI (6264)  
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The NAMI STAR Center is a SAMHSA-funded technical assistance center dedicated to promoting and enhancing recovery, mental health, and wellness through information, training, and resources on effective self-help and multicultural competence and social inclusion approaches with a special focus on working with underserved communities.

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STAR Center Staff:

Philip Qualo, J.D.  
Program Manager

Stephen Kiosk, M.Div., LPC  
Director

With special thanks for support, guidance and collaboration:

Michael Fitzpatrick, M.S.W.  
Executive Director  
NAMI

Lynn Borton  
Chief Operating Officer  
NAMI

Risa S. Fox, M.S., L.C.S.W.  
Public Health Advisor  
Center for Mental Health Services  
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services  
Administration

# Multicultural Competence, Intense Spiritual Experiences, and Mental Health: A Self-help, Peer Support and Service Provider Technical Assistance Tool

Written by: Rev. Laura L. Mancuso, M.S., C.R.C.



*This resource tool highlights the major findings from a STAR Center workshop regarding multicultural competence, intense spiritual experiences and mental health. It presents the recommendations developed by participants from diverse backgrounds who met over two days using a consensus workshop process. The complete report can be found at [www.consumerstar.org](http://www.consumerstar.org).*

## Overview

Throughout human history, religion and spirituality have shaped daily life and culture. Regardless of whether it refers to an ultimate reality or an experience solely involving human imagination, spirituality can be understood to offer great benefit in terms of meaning, purpose and vitality, especially if viewed broadly enough to include access to unlimited potential, energy, and opportunity.

At the same time—and especially within the context of recovery, mental health and wellness—spirituality can also involve *intense* spiritual experiences that can be overwhelming, terrifying, disturbing and dramatic.

Intense spiritual experiences can happen to anyone. For some, it is the result of focused attention with a spiritual practice, such as extended meditation or wilderness experiences. For others, it is an uninvited intrusion into an otherwise ordinary day. The future course of a person's life can be greatly impacted by the way in which the experience is viewed and responded to.

There is established literature about spiritual emergence and spiritual emergencies; however, once a person has been identified as having a serious mental illness, these occurrences have too often been discounted or presumed to be indicative of psychiatric symptoms rather than authentic spiritual experiences.

One of the foundational principles of the STAR Center workshop was the assumption that intense spiritual experiences can co-occur with altered states, commonly referred to in the mental health field as psychotic episodes.

## Spiritual Experiences Can Occur During Altered States

"Some people experience altered states with a spiritual component that can support the journey toward wellness and recovery.

For some, this can be a life-changing event.

Too often, this spiritual component has been ignored, labeled, or confused with delusions or other symptoms.

Providers should respond respectfully and appropriately when clients ask for assistance with these experiences."

—Excerpt from the *Values Statement of the California Mental Health and Spirituality Initiative*, [www.mhspirit.org](http://www.mhspirit.org)

“The most important objectives of this meeting for me are, can there be spiritual components to altered states, such as those that would be labeled as ‘psychotic episodes?’ And how can I tell if the experience I’m having is a spiritual emergency or a ‘psychotic episode’ or both? This is why this meeting is so important to me.”

—Jay Mahler

“I have seen miracles in my life. There were days that I didn’t know where my next meal would come from. And then the next minute, someone would call up and say, ‘Hey, let’s go to lunch!’”

—Carmen Argueta

In a nutshell, *genuine mystical experiences can co-occur with altered states, or “psychosis.”* This is not to imply that they always do. Of course, sometimes altered states occur without any spiritual dimension. And mystical experiences can occur apart from any mental health issues, or even be the basis for positive mental health and recovery advances.

The important point here is that just because an intense spiritual experience takes place during an altered state does not mean it is “crazy” or meaningless. In fact, for many people, making meaning of the altered state can be a key to recovery and wellness.

This is why the dialogue that occurred at the STAR Center workshop, and that is documented here, is so important: Intense spiritual experiences can be life-altering, for better or worse. They can cause powerful shifts in consciousness, health status, identity and social roles. The response of people surrounding an individual while s/he moves through an intense spiritual experience can greatly affect the outcome. People who have been psychiatrically labeled are at increased risk for having their experiences discounted. Some cultural expressions of spirituality have been misdiagnosed as delusions or psychosis. The aim of the STAR Center Workshop was to elicit and document the spiritual wisdom of people who have moved through intense spiritual experiences about what helps, what hinders and how to increase the likelihood of benefit. Our purpose was to develop a written guide for mental health consumers and recommendations for their supporters regarding the deceptively simple question, “What is most important in helping people with intense spiritual experiences?”

It is not a simple question because each human being is so unique and the concept of spirituality is so vast.

The word “spirituality” itself means different things to different people, even among those who identify themselves as belonging to the same cultural group or organized religion. Its meaning is further diffused across different places, lands and times. For some, spirituality may reference an eternal and absolute being, truth, belief, dogma or doctrine. Others have powerful spiritual experiences apart from any of these constructs, while some view spirituality and religion as a distraction from the tangible here and now.

Yet through time and across all cultures, continents and worldviews, there is an undeniable drive in human beings to explore the spiritual realm. The powerful

## Spiritual Emergence and Spiritual Emergency

“In the most general terms, spiritual emergence can be defined as the movement of an individual to a more expanded way of being that involves enhanced emotional and psychosomatic health, greater freedom of personal choices and a sense of deeper connection with other people, nature and the cosmos. An important part of this development is an increasing awareness of the spiritual dimension in one’s life and in the universal scheme of things... When spiritual emergence is very rapid and dramatic, however, this natural process can become a crisis and spiritual emergence becomes spiritual emergency.”

—Christina Grof and Stanislav and Grof, *The Stormy Search for the Self: Understanding and Living with Spiritual Emergency*, 1990, pp. 34-5.

influence of the cultural context of spirituality and religious experience comes into sharp focus when discussing extreme states and non-ordinary experiences. An individual's social status may be elevated or damaged by having an intense spiritual experience, depending on where and when they live.

One of the explicit objectives of the STAR Center's work is to expand the multicultural framework for mental health services in the United States. It does this by valuing the lived experience of individuals regarding difficult mental health and behavioral challenges, those who might identify themselves as consumers of mental health or behavioral care services as well as their supporters. The STAR Center seeks to amplify voices that have too long been disregarded or marginalized, sometimes unknowingly and sometimes subtly, with serious impact.

Spirituality is a highly personal phenomenon, yet we can be aided on our spiritual journeys by interacting with and learning from others who have gone before us. The 16 participants in the STAR Center workshop in November of 2009 have offered their own experiences and insights with the intention of aiding others who are moving through intense spiritual experiences and guiding those who would support them. We hope and trust that you, the reader, will find something here of value to your own path.



## An Open Letter to Individuals Having Intense Spiritual Experiences

***What's going on? What is this? I'm scared and don't know what to do.***

*Be aware this is a process. Trust the process. It is a chance to let go of some things you no longer need and to explore and find new parts of yourself. You can make meaning from this experience.*

*Find spiritually sensitive people to talk to. Find someone safe who will respect your experience. If someone treats you like you are "crazy" or "mentally ill," seek another person who is willing to be with you. There are people who are experienced in this and who understand this territory. It is important to find someone who will provide acceptance, understanding and reverence for your process. Someone who will not label your process, or stop it or "fix" it, but will hold witness without any agenda other than to hold sacred space and honor your innate wisdom and wholeness.*

*Even though your experience is powerful and special, be sure to take care of yourself—sleep, eat nutritious food, breathe, use centering practices, walk in nature. Be respectful of your body even if you feel good. Find a place of beauty and serenity to be in.*

*Find a way to express what is going on with you: painting, journaling, writing poetry, movement/dance/music, etc. Find a way to express yourself that feels authentic to you.*

*Consider finding a culturally appropriate healing model that uses ceremony, ritual, or traditional counseling that feels authentic to you.*

*Trust your intuition to find the right help if you encounter any dark or negative energies, spirits or fears.*

This letter was written by people who have lived through these experiences. We were called together for a reason: to create information that will help others through these experiences. Your healing and support has already begun!

## Workshop Participants

*“I live here, but my spirit is bigger than my mind and my body and my culture and my relationships. Because I found a way to connect to something, someone that gave me information where nobody else on this plane could. And so, for me, I would say my spiritual emergence is simply about being through a soul level version of interpreting, and that I have to disseminate the information on this planet. Whether it’s a bird, whether it’s a tree...I get information through my senses v. getting information through my intellect. When I meditate, I line all of those things up together, and on a psychic geometry level I am one, I am one with all there is. I tap into that world or that place by bypassing all the intellectual parts of it into my heart. And so I receive information on a clairsentient level. And then it processes through my intellect. And when it gets overwhelming, I go down to my heart and my heart tells me, “This is love, this is not love.” So for me, I use this system of recreating that communication through that innocence of the age of five, knowing that I am in this world but I am not of it. And that way, I am able to get information that supports my wellness.”*

– Gitane Williams

Following are the names, affiliations of participants at the time of the workshop.

John Aldam, Stockbridge, Mass.

Carmen Argueta, NAMI National Office, Arlington, Va.

Steven A. Bucholtz. M. Ed, Wellness Educator, Wellness Recovery Resiliency Hub, Alameda County Behavioral Health Care Services, Oakland, Calif.

James W. “Jimi” Kelley III, Program Development - MultiCultural Outreach, State Committee for MultiCultural Outreach, National Committee for American Indian/Alaska Native Issues, NAMI Tennessee, Nashville

Dave Kennedy, Veteran Outreach Specialist, Southeastern Mental Health Authority, Norwich, Conn.

Stephen Kiosk, M.Div., LPC, Director, STAR Center (Support, Technical Assistance and Resources Center), NAMI, Arlington, Virginia

David Lukoff, PhD, Professor of Psychology, Institute for Transpersonal Psychology & Founder, Spiritual Competency Resource Center, Petaluma, California Jay Mahler, Consumer Relations Manager, Alameda County Behavioral Healthcare Services, Oakland, California

Rev. Laura L. Mancuso, M.S., C.R.C., Interfaith Chaplain, Santa Barbara, Calif.

Catherine Quinnerly, CPRP, Administrative Coordinator & Latin Peer Project Coordinator, The Transformation Center, Roxbury, Mass.

Priscilla Ridgway, Ph. D., Assistant Professor, Yale University Program for Recovery and Community Health, New Haven, Conn.

Can Truong, Can Consulting Group and Center for Education Empowerment, Kettering, Ohio and Moab, Utah

Ruth Villaseñor, Oakland, Calif.

Debbie Whittle, Lawrence, Mass.

Mertice "Gitane" Williams, Vocational Wellness Educator, Crestwood Behavioral Health Inc., Sacramento

Jaleah Winn, B.A., Wellness Educator, Wellness Recovery Resiliency Hub, Alameda County Behavioral Health Care Services and Member, Pool of Consumer Champions, Oakland, Calif.

# Principles for Honoring Intense Spiritual Experiences

1. **Authentic spiritual experiences can occur during altered states.** For some people living with mental health issues, these two things sometimes (or always) go together. Unfortunately, many mental health providers are not open to, or respectful of, this possibility. An intense spiritual experience may look, from the outside, like psychosis; it may also co-occur with psychotic symptoms. If the individual is supported to move through the intense spiritual experience and validated in making meaning of it, it may constitute progress in his or her personal journey toward wellness.
2. **Trust the process.** Understand that it is a process. It's okay not to know what will happen next; don't try to control the process. Make space for what is moving and shifting emotionally, intellectually, physically and spiritually.
3. When you trust the process, then it naturally follows that you do not need to rush it. **Don't try to hurry it.** It can be damaging when someone else tries to **halt or hurry another's intense spiritual experience. The way through it is to go more deeply into the process,** not to back away from it. Slow down and be flexible.
4. **The experience may include intense feelings and bodily sensations. Encourage the person to bring a stance of awareness, rather than judgment, to these aspects of the experience.** Prompt him or her to query the feeling or sensation to see what wisdom it may hold, treating it like a visitor that is passing through. What can be learned from this particular encounter before it's gone? **Respect the individual's innate sense** of what's going on with his or her own physical, mental, emotional and spiritual self.
5. Spirituality, religion and processes of personal transformation are closely tied to culture. **To assist someone going through an intense spiritual experience, it is vital to become familiar with his or her worldview and cultural frame of reference.** Expand your knowledge of cultures different from your own and be open to continuous learning in this regard. Consider the individual's culture as you observe and receive his or her words, body language, symbols, humor, expressions, requests, etc. Be aware of and sensitive to the clashing of cultures that may occur when someone is having an intense spiritual experience (e.g., between the dominant culture of program staff and the culture of the individual having an intense spiritual experience; between the culture of a forensic or law enforcement setting where an intense experience may begin and the safe/nurturing/sacred environment the person needs to move through it and come out more whole).
6. **Client choice with respect to spirituality and religion is paramount. Do not push your own religious or nonreligious views on another human being,** especially when he or she is in a vulnerable state, such as the disorientation of an intense spiritual experience. This is a time to hear and affirm the individual's belief system, not try to change it to match yours, regardless of how helpful your belief system is to you. Do your best to understand the individual's own belief system. If they speak of "God," "Allah," "The Great Spirit," "The Oneness" or a "Higher Power," adopt their preferred language in referring to the divine. If the person is secular, don't introduce spiritual or religious concepts or language that conflict with his/her own beliefs or culture.
7. **Some people report encountering negative energies (what some might label as "evil forces") during intense spiritual experiences.** When this happens, it can be very frightening and disorienting. Individuals may choose to use specific spiritual or religious rituals that have meaning in their own cultures to overcome the influence of these negative energies. Demonstrate respect and compassion for their experiences and approaches, even if they differ from your own.
8. **Recognize the danger and the opportunity in crisis.** Behavior that falls outside societal norms is not necessarily dangerous. If you as an observer feel scared, ask yourself, "why?" Is it simply because you are being

*“How incredible is this exchange! How many times have you gone to a meeting where it’s crickets in the room? How much energy and time have we spent trying to whip up passion at other meetings? So, as difficult as this process is, we should appreciate that it’s because people are passionate about what they have to say! This a conversation I’ve never been able to have with anybody, for the most part, literally! So for me there’s a certain amount of enthusiasm about this and the potential impact of where it’s all going.”*

– John Aldam

*“My most intense spiritual experiences have typically had to do with me thinking I have a direction for my life, and Spirit having other plans, and the process of that becoming known to me. And the more that I resist the other plans, the louder the call gets, until it can get quite uncomfortable, physically and mentally and emotionally and spiritually.*

*I will say, it’s a little unnerving to live in a way that I don’t know when the next direction is gonna come, or the next calling, or you know, I think I’m going this way, but maybe I’ve got it wrong; and if I’ve got it wrong, Spirit will let me know; and if I don’t pay attention, Spirit will get LOUDER, until it can actually become quite painful, which I’m not signing up for again voluntarily!”*

–Laura Mancuso

exposed to behavior that you are not familiar with or do not understand? Are there truly risks to the safety of the individual, others or the environment? If so, what safety responses are currently in place or need to be put in place?

Mental health programs should educate staff about intense spiritual experiences, how best to support a person having one and **how to distinguish between an intense spiritual experience that they can safely accompany someone through as opposed to one that requires intervention** or even hospitalization.

Sometimes people are so focused on their inner state that they may temporarily not be fully aware of the implications of their actions. Supporters can play an important role in providing for a person’s safety during an intense spiritual experience. Be constantly looking for when a person has moved through the experience sufficiently to begin to take back responsibility for his or her actions again as soon as possible.

An individual may report that they hear God’s voice instructing them to do something dangerous; this is one sign of an emergency that requires immediate attention. However, just because people report hearing God’s voice speaking to them does not automatically mean they are dangerous. It helps to designate staff with special interest, expertise or experience with intense spiritual experiences. Supporters should never be afraid to ask for help or to involve other team members as needed.

9. **There is an inherent tension between controlling and facilitating.** When one is overly focused on safety and risk management, it tends to become a priority to stop the intense experience as quickly as possible, which may be damaging to the individual’s mental, emotional and/or spiritual well-being in the long term. When talking about “safety,” be sure to distinguish whether you are referring to safety as defined by the individual moving through the intense spiritual experience, the safety of his/her surroundings or of other people, and address the needs and precautionary measures and/or actions concerning all areas.
10. As with any aspect of health care, the individual should be in control of his or her own life and supports as much as possible. This is of particular importance when things feel “out of control.” **Let the person having the experience be in control as much as possible.** For example, asking how you can help rather than assuming you know what’s best, or telling a person what you think he or she needs.
11. Recognize that **the locus of control may shift over time.** There may be moments when the individual is out of control, overwhelmed by the process and needs help to remain safe. Do not violate the trust it requires for him or her to rely on you to offer assistance through the intense spiritual experience. Always be looking to return that control to the individual as soon as possible. Control may shift back and forth many times.
12. **The individual may have an increased level of sensitivity to sensory stimuli. For this reason, qualities of the physical environment may have a significant impact** on the process of moving through an intense spiritual



experience. Ask the person what is safe, sacred and nurturing to him or her in this moment. A few considerations might be:

- **Lighting.** Fluorescent lighting is harsh; low lighting or gel-covered lights are softer.
  - **Indoors vs. outdoors.** Some people will prefer being indoors; others will be better supported if they can make contact with the earth, trees, sunlight, etc.
  - **Noise.** Some people may experience heightened sensitivity to noise and request silence; others may want to be surrounded by sounds of nature or soothing music.
  - **Isolation vs. contact.** Some people may want to be alone, yet know that a support person is nearby if needed. Others may want to be accompanied by a respectful supporter at all times.
  - **Physical contact.** As with noise, people may have a heightened sensitivity to touch. Give people the space to have their experience. Do not rush in to stop him or her from crying or expressing frustration. Always ask permission before touching. Respect the person's boundaries and cultural background in this regard. One person may be tremendously comforted by being hugged, held or even swaddled while another may find it suffocating. They will let you know if they want to be touched. Ask first.
13. The person may, at times, be so absorbed by the intense spiritual experience that he or she is not attending to **basic needs for food, water, sleep, clothing or physical safety.** Offer assistance in this regard. Appropriate medication to enable sleep might be helpful. People may request from their service providers mild tranquilizers to help with anxiety or agitation. **Do not medicate with the goal of halting the process unless there is an imminent risk of harm to the individual or others.**
  14. Others can help by maintaining a calm and nonjudgmental presence. Employ your own spiritual practices to keep yourself grounded. **Offer opportunities for yourself and the individual having the experience to get more grounded,** such as breathing, yoga, meditation, prayer, energy healing, silence, contact with nature, etc.
  15. Creative expression can be very healing while moving through an intense spiritual experience. **Provide the tools for the individual to express him or herself through a variety of modalities,** such as art, drumming, music, dance, writing, prayer, etc. Be open to exaggerated expression as a means to release emotions, thoughts or memories.
  16. If a person in crisis loses control in a way that is deemed unsafe, this may trigger the involvement of law enforcement and the potential use of force, including involuntary hospitalization or confinement in jail. Given their heightened state of consciousness and sensitivity, people in intense spiritual states will be acutely and deeply harmed by the use of force, so it should be avoided if at all possible and used only as a last resort, not as a primary intervention. **In addition to the consequences of the spiritual/psychiatric experience itself, the use of force may cause traumatization or retraumatization that needs to be acknowledged and healed** in order for the person to return to his or her regular living, learning, working or social environments.

*“My father and I had never really gotten along all that well. At one point, we went on a pilgrimage to Bosnia, to a place called Medgegoria where The Blessed Mother had appeared for years. We were walking back from a service when he said, “I just want to let you know that I see you.” I said, “What do you mean?” He continued, “I see how difficult your life has been. All of the challenges you have faced. And I want to tell you how proud I am of you that you turned out to be such a wonderful person, that you care about other people.” That was the one thing I had always wanted in my life, was to have my father see me. Years later when I entered a religious community, he gave me a little picture of The Blessed Mother and on the back of it he wrote, “This is in remembrance of when we met.”*

– Steven Bucholtz

Photo by Rev. Laura L. Mancuso. Used with permission.



17. Relationships can be strained when a person goes into an altered state and may require repair after the crisis has subsided. People having intense spiritual experiences may be temporarily unable to fulfill expected obligations and roles and may say and do unexpected things. When undertaken as part of a conscious process of integrating and moving beyond traumatic experiences, **forgiveness should be evaluated as one possible option that can free up mental and emotional energy for moving forward in life.** Loved ones may need to forgive the person for actions or words that occurred in an altered state and get past feelings of blame toward the person for “doing this to them” or “throwing their lives away.” The individual who was harmed may choose to forgive those who made decisions during the crisis, even damaging ones. The person who had the intense spiritual experience may need to make peace with their Higher Self/Higher Power/The Divine/The Creator/God for a sense of alienation or abandonment that occurred during the crisis. We may need to forgive ourselves and we may need to ask others to forgive us.
18. A recovery orientation is a hallmark of high quality mental health services. Service recipients should be assumed to be capable of determining the course of their own lives, including handling crises. **Peers and programs can assist individuals to develop personal skills and crisis plans to prepare for intense spiritual experiences that may occur in the future.** For example, as part of the Wellness Recovery and Action Plans developed by Mary Ellen Copeland (see [www.mentalhealthrecovery.com](http://www.mentalhealthrecovery.com)), individuals can specify who, what, when, where and how they would like to be supported in the event of a spiritual crisis, including creating a network of support. Supporters can help by prompting an individual who has had an intense spiritual experience to reflect on what sorts of supports would be ideal in the future and to support him or her in putting those plans in place. Empower them to develop their own coping skills for going through an intense spiritual experience; the long-term goal is for the individual to be able to contend with these experiences on their own as much as possible.

Keep in mind that it may take many months or even years for an individual to fully “process” an intense spiritual experience. The full meaning of the experience in the person’s life may emerge slowly. Be as patient in the aftermath as you were during the peak of the intensity. Do not withdraw supports too abruptly when it appears that the crisis is over. Continue to offer support and affirmation.

19. Given the high percentage of mental health clients with histories of trauma, **high quality mental health services will utilize and incorporate the principles of trauma-informed care.** For example, Roger Fallot and Maxine Harris (Roger Fallot and Maxine Harris of Community Connections in Washington, DC) have identified domains\* for evaluating the extent to which programs comply with these principles. The following are some sample criteria:

To what extent do the program’s activities and settings ensure the physical and emotional safety of consumers?

- Are the reception, waiting areas and interview rooms comfortable and inviting?
- Are the first contacts with consumers welcoming, respectful and engaging?
- Are security personnel present? What impact does their presence have?
- Are staff attentive to signs of consumer discomfort or unease? Do they understand these signs in a trauma-informed way?
- In making contact with consumers, is there sensitivity to potentially unsafe situations (e.g. domestic violence)?

To what extent do the program’s activities and settings maximize trustworthiness by making the tasks involved in service delivery clear, by ensuring consistency in practice and by maintaining boundaries that are appropriate to the program? How can the program maximize honesty and transparency?

To what extent do the program’s activities and settings maximize experiences of choice and control?

- How much choice does the individual have over what services he or she receives; when, where and by whom the service is provided (e.g. time of day or week, office vs. home vs. other locale, gender of providers, etc.)?
- Do individuals understand that they have to “prove” themselves in order to “earn” the right to participate in other services?
- Are there negative consequences for exercising particular choices?

To what extent do the program's activities and settings maximize collaboration and sharing of power between staff and consumers?

These same principles will be useful in supporting individuals having intense spiritual experiences.

20. Finally, **spirituality can be part of a holistic approach to mental health**. Spirituality takes different forms for different people. For some, it may be most relevant during acute episodes; for others, it may be a foundation of beliefs and practices that support their long-term recovery. While being careful not to impose any aspect of spirituality or religious beliefs, **programs should strive to promote balance of body, mind and spirit** among service recipients, staff and the community.

\* See the model "Creating Cultures of Trauma-Informed Care" developed by Community Connections ([www.communityconnectionsdc.org](http://www.communityconnectionsdc.org)) and based on the book, *Using Trauma Theory to Design Service Systems*, (2001), edited by Maxine Harris, Ph.D., and Roger Fallot, Ph.D.

## DOs and DON'Ts When Accompanying a Person Having an Intense Spiritual Experience

*When supporting someone who is going through an intense spiritual experience, keep in mind which actions that are likely to be helpful or not helpful. Here is a quick reference list.*

**DO** bring a genuine attitude of empathy, compassion, openness and respect.

**DO** meet the person where he or she is at. Offer unconditional support as in, "I will 'hold' you in whatever loving way you want me to," or "I will be here with you and support you as much as I possibly can."

**DO** inquire about any life events that may have precipitated the crisis.

**DO** listen deeply. Demonstrate that you've listened by reflecting back (paraphrasing) what was said, which also gives him or her the opportunity to correct any misunderstandings on your part.

**DO** be open to the unknown.

**DO** be open to something good resulting from an arduous transformative process, even if not obvious just yet. For example, you might say, "I have confidence that you will be able to make sense of all this in time. For now, simply experience it."

**DO** be sensitive to the person's cultural frame of reference. Strive to be a nonjudgmental, spiritually and culturally sensitive guide.

**DO** acknowledge the person's strengths in the face of challenges. (Think of "the hero's journey.")

**DO** allow exaggerated expression. Say, "It's okay, let it out!"

**DO** provide the tools for creative expression of intense emotions (e.g. art supplies, paper and pen for journal writing, space for dancing, playing drums, etc.).

**DO** monitor your own level of discomfort so that you can be more fully present.

**DO** assist the person in creating a space in which they're comfortable. Check in with the individual about features of the environment that will be most supportive (e.g., his or her preferences for lighting, sound, being indoors or outdoors, alone or accompanied, etc.).

*“I am greatly honored to be a part of this process because spirituality is at my core, it’s the core of who I am. If it had not been for my spirituality, I don’t think I would have been able to make it through my mental health crises. I must attribute my courage—because I think it takes courage to tell your story—the courage in me to tell the story of having that intense spiritual experience comes from a greater source outside myself. I could not do it of myself. So I’m very grateful to have a spiritual path.*

*I remember when I went through one of my crises, my mother said to me, “One day you’re gonna have a great testimony!” And I think that has helped me today. It assures me that me telling my story of my crises and dealing with them and the process of recovery that I’m still going through, that I’m empowering myself and I’m empowering other people that hear from me. I want to celebrate the fact, and honor the fact, that we’re here sharing out stories.”*

*—Jaleah Winn*

**DO** ask if the person wants contact with friends, family members, counselors, religious leaders, indigenous healers or other members of his/her community or clan.

**DO** support the individual to develop his/her own coping skills for going through intense spiritual experiences.

**DO** assist the individual to create a crisis plan for optimal support in the event that another intense spiritual experience occurs.

**DON’T** judge or interpret, simply accompany.

**DON’T** set a time limit. Instead, say, “Take as much time as you need.”

**DON’T** be too quick to diagnose. Rather than “pathologizing” the experience (or seeing it in terms of something bad or defective to be fixed), affirm its value by saying, “This is a natural and powerful process.”

**DON’T** be too quick to use medications right away and **DON’T** ever overmedicate. Powerful medications can be tremendously helpful, but they can also be used too quickly or used in ways that may overlook other important and meaningful issues and processes.

**DON’T** attempt to “fix” the “problem” right away; just go with it. Say, “I’m here.” Examine and release your own need to “help” by feeling a need to be in control of the process.

**DON’T** approach the person with a limited agenda. Rather ask, “How can I be most helpful in this moment?” While your role and purpose is important, how can you expand your sensitivity to process-oriented issues?

**DON’T** hesitate to ask for help if you feel overwhelmed, fearful for the safety of yourself, the individual, others or the environment.

### What “experiencers” want you to hear and take to heart:

- Your role is to honor, respect and validate. Conceive of your role as one of *witnessing* my journey. It is helpful to hear you say things like, “I’m honored to be by your side right now.”
- You may not be able to predict my path (no one can), but you can help me create a safe space—whatever “safe” means for me—as I move through it.
- You can help by holding a space for what is happening. Your mind doesn’t need to understand it.
- You have a right to attend to your own needs. Don’t sacrifice yourself for me. Be there to the extent that you are able. Take a break. Ask for help when needed.
- Strive to create a space that is safe, sacred and nurturing—as I define safe, sacred and nurturing in this moment. Ask me, “What do you need to feel safe right now?”
- Keep in mind that you may learn something from witnessing my process.

## Afterword

At no other time in human history have so many individuals, groups, societies, cultures and geographies been introduced to each other through instantaneous communication, from cell phone videos to emails to blog pages to text messages.

Along with these seemingly simple introductions to each other come some very daunting issues and questions, such as:

“With so many differing points of view, belief systems, practices and system-models-put-to-practice, how is it determined what is ‘real’ or ‘who is right?’ about any significant issue, challenge or possibility?”

“Who says?” “And from what basis, locus of authority, system, unexamined socially conditioned assumptions, historical and culturally-based understanding or perspective?”

“How can one thing be real for one person or many in one part of the world or according to a particular way of valuing everyday life with certain words and ideas and be a very different kind of reality for another person or group of people somewhere else in the world or at a different time?”

“Is there any community wisdom on similar experiences from humanity’s rich global history, culture and practices to draw from so that current ways can be enlightened, changed or transformed for the benefit of all who are involved?”

“What is spirituality?”

“How is spirituality an aspect, foundation or experiential strength for people in their recovery and wellness?”

“What do we make of spirituality when things get really, really difficult, out of control, traumatic and difficult to understand or when I or someone else has an ‘intense spiritual experience’?”

In November 2009, the STAR Center convened sixteen individuals to embark on a journey together to explore some of these questions. That report, from which this tool was developed, documents their discussion, insights and experiences during the two-day workshop on Multicultural Competence, Intense Spiritual Experiences and Mental Health.

Our goal was to generate and provide insight, comments and guidance that could later be used to inform the creation of tools and guidelines for consumers (of mental health services or individuals with experience with emotional, mental and behavioral challenges) and consumer supporters, so that the resulting materials would honor the spiritually transformative experiences that can occur alongside, through, after or as an integral part of, altered states of awareness and experience.

With so many differing ways of experiencing the world and the diverse ways of putting words and names to things based on differing assumptions and world views, there will be conflicts, misunderstandings and clashes. Controversy and clashes are normal, especially when talking about issues that are as personal, meaningful and important as those discussed here.

The conversation, however, is very important.

Some might call it necessary. Some might call it useful. Some might see it as long overdue.

*“I want everyone to remember -- even if you are practitioners or clinicians – that animals are a way for us to heal. They bridge communities. They don’t look at race. They give us unconditional love. They can be really really amazingly healing for people.”*

*–Ruth Villaseñor*

*“Until I lost everything—my ability for my mind to tell my brain what to do, my ability to make a living, my ability to be comfortable and to be in pain every day...all of that actually allowed me to come back and do the work of recovery. Sometimes you don’t like these lessons at all. It’s very much a stripping away. Then you find out, I’m not the only person who goes through this. Jesus went through it this way, Buddha went through it that way. A few minor people like that! They also had this experience of this stripping away. The more you talk to people, the more you find out, your ego gets busted until you want to let go of it, and learn to just be who you are going to be. So I’m working on this, integrating this.”*

*– Priscilla Ridgway*

*“There’s so much that converges when a group like this is assembled. It’s like a ripple effect. All of us are pebbles dropped in the water, and all of our rings are overlapping. And that’s a good thing, because it’s important for us to share.”*

*It is a wonder that I am alive, that all of us are alive, and it is likewise a wonder that we are able to be here together today to explore topics of such critical import to each of us and to our very survival. I am honored to be here.”*

–Dave Kennedy

*“It’s been an incredible honor for me to be here. Because anyone who chooses not to assimilate has been labeled as “crazy,” anyone who chooses not to assimilate. And you are the ones, when they get to that point where their little charade isn’t gonna work anymore, they’re gonna go, “Oh! Maybe these cats know something!” And you’re gonna say, “Yes, thank you for asking,” in the most loving way possible...so that all the peoples might live.”*

–Jane DeCuir

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Department of Health and Human Services for grant funding for this workshop and all STAR Center work. SAMHSA grant funding makes it possible for the STAR Center to assist peer/consumer-operated and consumer-supporter programs to expand and deepen multicultural competence, effective self-help, inclusion, recovery and wellness approaches and practices. Sincere thanks go to Risa Fox at SAMHSA for her insights and significant wisdom that emphasize respectful collaboration, accountable goal-setting and problem-solving, evidence-based and effective practices and approaches, service and systems transformation, and a never-ending focus on creating positive impact-results with and for individuals, families, networks, organizations, and diverse communities.


Additional thanks are extended as well to others who have been instrumental for these materials:

- To Rev. Laura Mancuso for her easy collaboration, excellent content synthesis and masterful writing to create such a powerful tool and report
- To Michael Fitzpatrick and Lynn Borton at NAMI for their visionary leadership and collaboration in encouraging the exploration of potentially sensitive and complex issues involving recovery and mental health issues, wellness, education and advocacy
- To Steven Bucholz and Jaleah Winn for their excellent workshop facilitation and to the workshop participants for their contributions and wisdom from which the tool and report was created
- To NAMI’s Carmen Argueta, who was instrumental in helping make the workshop, accompanying report, and tool come about
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- To STAR colleague, Philip Qualo, for his wisdom and valued support for the final preparation stages of the tool and the accompanying report. Working on this material evoked many STAR discussions on big questions of meaning, purpose, and explorations about what is possible for recovery and human potential in light of cultural beliefs and scientific research

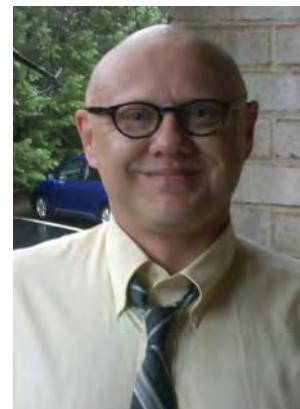
It is my hope that including spirituality in discussions of recovery and wellness will enhance cultural competence and effective person-centered approaches, programs and practices.

Healing and transformation among individuals, networks, families, providers, programs, systems, cultures and communities **is possible** and you are invited to take part in this important work.

Sincerely,



Stephen Kiosk, M.Div., L.P.C.  
Director, STAR Center  
NAMI  
skiosk@nami.org  
www.consumerstar.org



## For More Information

For the complete report from the workshop and resources on recovery and wellness, self-determination and cultural competence, please visit [www.consumerstar.org](http://www.consumerstar.org) or contact:

Stephen Kiosk, M.Div., L.P.C.  
Director, STAR Center  
National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)  
Arlington, Va.  
(703) 600-1113  
[skiosk@nami.org](mailto:skiosk@nami.org)

Philip Qualo, J.D.  
Program Manager, STAR Center  
National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)  
Arlington, VA  
(703) 600-1114  
[pqualo@nami.org](mailto:pqualo@nami.org)

Rev. Laura L. Mancuso, M.S., C.R.C.  
Interfaith Chaplain/  
Consultant to the STAR Center  
Santa Barbara, Calif.  
[mancuso@west.net](mailto:mancuso@west.net)



*“One of the things that made a lot sense to me later in life after family tragedy and death due to severe mental health issues was the realization that there are many different kinds of ‘medicine.’*

*I sometimes chuckle to myself now when I look at my I Ching beads in a medicine bottle, realizing that we live in a land mine field, metaphorically speaking, of different vested belief systems, products, world views and models having to do with illness and health.*

*It’s so clear to me now how important it is that self-determination, cultural differences, shared-decision-making and informed choice regarding different roles and authority levels be taken seriously and integrated into recovery and wellness. There is no “one size fits all” here. Recovery, health, and wellness, while there can be common components, are uniquely tailored to each life as are the infinite designs to flakes of snow.”*

*– Steve Kiosk*





*“Let your star shine!”*



National Alliance on Mental Illness

3803 N. Fairfax Dr., Suite 100  
Arlington, Va. 22203-1701  
Toll-free: (866) 537-STAR (7827)  
Fax: (703) 600-1112

Email: [star@nami.org](mailto:star@nami.org) • [www.consumerstar.org](http://www.consumerstar.org)